

John McAuliffe

**SELECTED
POEMS**



Gallery Books

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for Nancy

Nightjar

Everyone knew about it before long,
my mother's mother's return
to Newmarket from Hong Kong
with her policeman, his pension

and, stranded with them, her ayah,
who with her eyes closed and no one about
would burn orange peel on the Aga
and kept one other personal habit,

hanging washed jars off the ash trees
in her family's back garden
where they'd outstare the neighbours
like some never-seen-before bird.

Africa

Heat rises, palpably, having scorched and cracked the earth.
In the distance, unreal as a cloud, a mountain looms;
a few kids amble by with shorts on and nothing else.
At night, at their watering holes, I listen to their fathers:
'If this weather doesn't break . . .', 'It's like bloody Africa.'

My Adolescence in New Zealand

for Bill Manhire

I didn't want to go to bed and then
I didn't want to get up. The men,
my uncles and father, planned to watch
the international, a grudge match,
on the new remote-controlled TV.
I was beginning to get ideas about coffee.
I sniffled and coughed, my nose in a book.
The *Rainbow Warrior* turned into Helen Clark.
Those days we worried about serious things.
I was never into *The Lord of the Rings*.
I preferred biographies of polar explorers:
a long journey and evidence of errors
disappearing like a snowflake in Antarctica,
a dropped knife tuning up for the orchestra.

Jane Eyre in Derry

Seven hours with Charlotte Brontë
on the Galway-Sligo bus to Derry
and on arrival, reader, it would be hard not
to have a problem with the shut, shuttered pubs,
the early closing of unknown bookshops,
the picketed cinema not screening *Prêt-à-Porter*,
the black cab's same old uncongenial story . . .
But I'm happily lost in writing a list
at the loose end of your shift
when here you are, you and the bright air
of your short, boyish haircut
which you wear, in Altnagelvin,
like an amulet
to stop roughly half the staff knowing
what they believe in.

Snail Days

Back and forth to town and ocean:
the train that takes us, snail days,
runs between like a thought,

a thought with rain streaking it
and fields like a faithful companion.
A swaying to which we listen,

coming, here and there, to terms
with the tide's systemic pulse,
the Atlantic silver like a city at night.

An Briathar Saor

Having cleared almost everything
we miss the piano and the bicycle on our return.
The piano went north, in a horsebox.
Not an ornament or even a photo is left
in the space where the sideboard has been.
The bed frames and mattresses are gone
from the bedroom where we ask
about the bike. A wheel will go east,
it's said, a pedal south, the chain west.
One story slopes away from another,
brother and sister, mother, father.
Put them together, you'll get the picture.